

## on the other side of normal by Naladot

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Coping, F/M, Moving On

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler

**Relationships:** Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2016-10-05

**Updated:** 2016-10-05

**Packaged:** 2022-04-01 20:34:48

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 2,044

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

After a few years, Nancy Wheeler is fine. Except, of course, that she's not.

## on the other side of normal

After a few years, Nancy Wheeler is fine.

She packs up her parents' old station wagon and goes off to Purdue for a sold four-year college degree, promising herself that she will never again live in Hawkins, so help her God, or whoever might be listening. She goes to classes, she goes out with Steve, she goes to parties and she goes to bed for a dreamless sleep with the help of a Valium she buys off the girl in a dorm room down the hall. All of this demonstrates, unequivocally, that Nancy Wheeler is fine.

Occasionally she visits a counselor in one of the older buildings on campus where the roof leaks and the sun never quite shines through the windows. She lies about most of her problems, pretending her chief traumatic experience was a guy she dated before she met Steve, and the counselor listens kindly and commends her coping skills.

Most importantly, Nancy Wheeler is fine.

Nancy and Steve are together in college mostly because they were together in high school, which is romantic in a very mundane way Nancy craves. And Steve is kind; he drives her to her counseling sessions and he talks about *it* without talking about it, and he never mentions that it's been two—and then three—years. Until one day he breaks and he really talks about it, and he says a lot of things Nancy ignores, and then he says, "It's like you're carrying a piece of that thing around with you and god, Nancy, it's like you're never going to be okay again."

Nancy knows he doesn't mean it the way it sounds. But she breaks up with him, anyway.

And she is fine.

She goes home late in the summer, after the corn has gotten as tall as

her and everyone else has already returned to Hawkins and found summer jobs. The only place with job openings anymore is the local pool, which she refuses to apply for. Her parents make brief comments about what a good swimmer she is and how she should take some responsibility for herself and her expenses, but Nancy just shrugs them off. She can't explain to them that plunging into the water makes her feel like she's plunging into that other place.

Late one afternoon she goes out for a walk, itchy from being inside that quiet house, but unsure of where she's headed. She spots Mike on her way out, and stops just briefly before she continues out the door. He's grown tall in the last few years, and quieter. They understand each other, even if they don't say it. She understands that there are some things she simply can't burden him with.

She walks until she's on county roads that haven't been paved over in years, narrow strips of concrete criss-crossing tall fields of corn. Dirt cakes on her feet and one of her flip-flops rubs a blister in between her toes. She doesn't stop walking. The sun is getting lower in the sky, and something in her brain sets off a warning signal, telling her to get home before dark, but she keeps walking.

After she doesn't know how long, a car engine sounds on the road behind her. She doesn't turn around. The car slows, and pulls up beside her, and she thinks dimly that this is exactly how horrific news articles begin—

But it's Jonathan Byers in the driver's seat.

"Nancy?"

She'd heard that Jonathan was attending classes at the local Ivy Tech before he dropped off the map entirely. No one she asked had heard about where he'd gone or what he was doing, but Nancy was always careful about who she asked, anyway. Sitting in his passenger seat, it's not that hard to believe that Jonathan was just driving this whole time, from Christmas to this moment, weaving his way along pothole-ridden county roads so that he could pick her up on a hot summer evening.

"It's good to see you, Jonathan Byers," she says without thinking. "I missed you, you know."

A smile quirks at the corner of his mouth. "You've got a funny way of showing it," he stammers out. It's just sarcastic enough to make her snort. When she glances his way again, he's smiling, his gaze slanting over to her before he turns to look out at the road again.

They stop along the riverside and climb up on the hood of Jonathan's car to watch the sun set through the trees. With Jonathan, she doesn't feel quite so afraid of the dark. Her skin tingles though as dusk approaches. She wonders how much he thinks about *it*. And about her.

"It's been a long time," he says after the sun has nearly disappeared. The air is hot, but Nancy feels chilled, and rubs her palm against the goosebumps forming on her arms.

"Yes," she agrees.

"Do you sleep much?"

Her mouth twists into a wry smile as she looks at him. "No. You?"

He grins, a little bashful. "Hardly at all."

Just like that, she spends most of her time with Jonathan Byers. She doesn't tell her parents where she's going every morning, and they don't ask. Mike does, once, mentioning that Will saw her outside his house. Nancy tells him she was just stopping by to say hi. It's not a secret if Mike already knows, if they're both just letting the truth flow under the surface, hot and bubbling, but covered with dirt.

She and Jonathan don't talk much. Or, rather, they don't need to say much. They talk about high school, sometimes. He asks about Purdue. He shows her a few photographs he'd taken during his semester off. He spent his time working, she discovers, picking up odd jobs between Hawkins and the Kentucky border, and then all the

way back up to Chicago.

Late one night, when the lightning bugs have begun blinking into the semi-dark, he tells her what he's really been doing. It stings a little, the truth coming right up to the surface. Nancy's gotten used to intentional ignorance.

"I know that what happened back then was—horrible—and I just, don't—don't get mad at me, okay?" Jonathan begins, leaning against the hood of his car with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched up, like he's a little bit afraid of her.

"What are you talking about?" Nancy clenches her hands into fists to stay steady. She's a little bit afraid of him, too. Mostly of what he's going to say next.

"I heard someone talking one day," he said, "About something weird, like—like going down the rabbit hole. You know, like in *Alice in Wonderland*?"

"Don't." Nancy says.

But it's too late. The truth is already laying out in the open, and she can't turn back.

Jonathan winces, but he keeps talking. "So I asked them to show me, and I went there, and I—I went *through*, you know—and—"

"You went *through*?" Nancy demands. "Why on earth would you be that stupid? Don't you remember—"

But Jonathan's eyes are gleaming.

"The place that monster came from—it's not the only other place, Nancy."

Nancy grows still, and very cold. The lighting bugs seem to flicker in time with her heartbeat as she watches a smile grow on Jonathan's face. He looks crazy. He is crazy. They are all crazy.

"Some of these places are beautiful," he says slowly. "Some of them are just like here, but stranger. Some of them are awful, like where

Will went—and where you went.”

In the back of Nancy’s mind there’s an echo of *and where Barb went*, but she doesn’t say it. Not saying things is usually preferable to putting words to what she thinks and feels. Instead, she asks him, “Why are you telling me this?”

Jonathan’s smile changes, fading a little, his eyes growing soft and concerned.

“Who else am I gonna tell?”

Of course, he’s right—who else is he going to tell?

Nancy goes home, anyway.

Her mom bakes lasagna for dinner. They talk about Mrs. Finch’s cat terrorizing the neighborhood birds, and about her dad’s plans to get the car fixed, and about what shows will be on television that night. Nancy excuses herself before anyone else has finished.

In the end she’s drawn back to Jonathan’s house like a fly hitting itself repeatedly against a lightbulb, too stupid to know when to fly away.

She taps on his window until he opens it, and this all feels very much like a scene from her high school life, because perhaps history has a way of repeating itself—Jonathan had said as much to her once, years ago, predicting that she was destined to repeat the banality of her parents. Only now that cycle has been broken and she’s stuck on this other loop, running up against the border between what her life should be, and what it could be.

“Why did you tell me all that?” she demands when he leans, bleary-eyed, out the window. “You couldn’t just leave me alone—”

“Look, Nancy, I’m sorry.” Jonathan sounds weary and much older than she remembers him. Nancy rocks back a little on her heels,

ready to turn and leave. She never should have come here in the first place. “You don’t have to stick around here. I just thought—”

“That I’d want to go with you?”

“No. I never thought that.”

Nancy freezes, her anger crystallizing and shattering around her. Deep down she’d thought he wanted her with him, that a great adventure awaited the two of them and she just *couldn’t* go. No way—she had to refuse him. But instead, she’s run into a door that was already closed and locked.

Nancy swallows. “I just want everything to be fine. I want to be normal again.”

Jonathan leans the heels of his hands against his windowsill and looks at her intently, his face gleaming in the moonlight.

“Everything isn’t fine, though. You know that. Nancy, normal—normal is for other people. People who didn’t see what we’ve seen.”

She pauses and thinks about what they’ve seen. What they’ve been through. She thinks about how the world looks like it’s made out of neat borders and well-defined laws, but all of that is just an illusion, set up to keep humanity from going crazy. “What if that’s what I want?” she asks.

Maybe Nancy doesn’t want to go crazy.

“I don’t know what to tell you.” Jonathan sighs. “If you want to be normal, then you’re going to have to go look for it yourself. I know I can’t be normal. Not anymore.”

Nancy takes a deep breath and wonders if she’s strong enough to keep herself on this side of the border between the world where she belongs, and the world she needs.

The trouble is, she’s not sure which is which.

In the end, Jonathan comes to her on a late summer evening, when the moon has risen and the sun has yet to set. Everything smells faintly of sun and dust. Nancy stands barefoot in her parents' driveway, watching the sun slant against the windows across the street. Jonathan's car comes into view down the road and she thinks, *this is goodbye*.

He pulls into the driveway and gets out of the car and they stand there, looking at each other. He glances up and nods to his left.

"You're coming, then?" he asks.

Nancy looks over at the two suitcases she'd carefully packed the night before, and her pair of sandals lined up neatly next to them. She snorts a little.

"Trial run," she says. "Don't get used to it."

"With you, I don't think I'll ever get used to anything."

Nancy gives him a wry smile, and then tilts forward on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. It's reminiscent of something, a cycle she's been through already. But this time, she knows, the ending is going to be different.

Nancy Wheeler isn't fine, and she hasn't been fine in a long time. But as she climbs into Jonathan Byers's car, sun setting behind them and the open road coming into view, she thinks that maybe—maybe—she can finally *be*.

### **Author's Note:**

I haven't had a chance to read much Stranger Things fic, so I'm not sure why I ended up writing one. Hope this little fic is enjoyable :)